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THE ITALIAN HILL TOWN OF DERUTA, FAMOUS THROUGH CENTURIES FOR ITS MAIOLICA POTTERIES

The Maiolica-Makers of Deruta

BY EDGAR HOLM

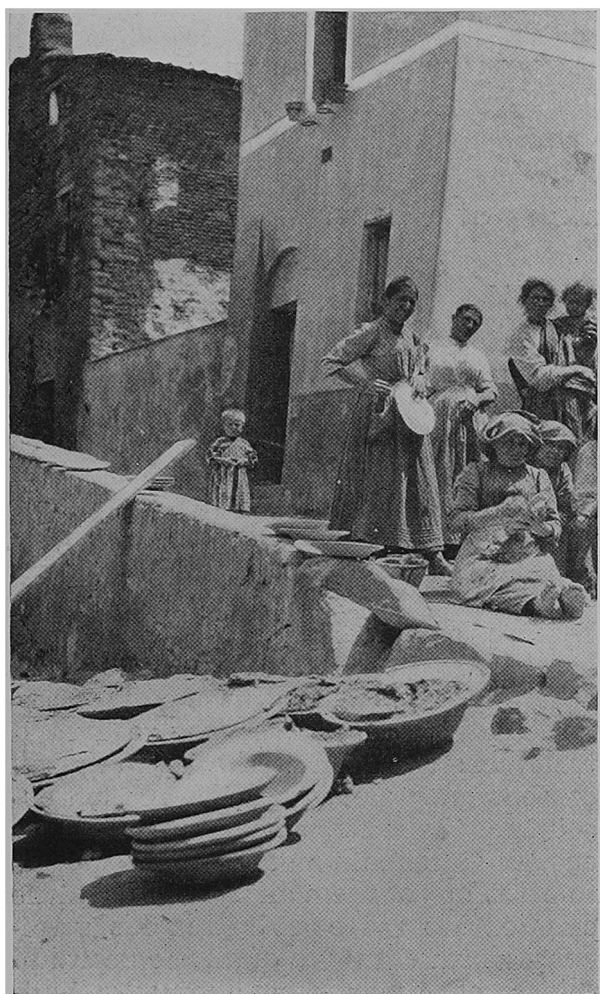
DERUTA is a little unvisited hill-top town, Romeward, a short distance from Perugia. Few travelers have bothered themselves to drive thither; few writers of travel books, if any, have concerned themselves with even the briefest description of this thoroughly interesting old-time town, cradle, perhaps, of the fabrication of the maiolica ware, that product of the ceramicist's art which has added to the fame of the Italian art products throughout the centuries which comprise the period of Italian pottery.

Perhaps we ourselves might not have come upon this delightfully quaint spot had not the Medici brought it all about. Do not, dear reader, rush to the conclusion that either Cosimo or Lorenzo, his grandson, inspired our trip. The Medici to whom I refer was a certain cheerful

individual who claimed London as his birthplace, the Albert and Victoria Museum as his *alma mater* and all things Italian as his passion. I have never known anyone so thoroughly a collector by instinct and by indulgence as was the Medici. So we called him, not because of his love for old things alone, but because, as the third of our trio, nicknamed Fra Benozzo, declared, he of all other human beings was the only one to be found the world over who really and truly constituted himself a patron of all contemporary things artistic. Others encouraged painting, some were generous enough to make it possible for sculptors to exist, but of them all the Medici alone emptied his purse and filled his storehouses with examples of all the beautiful things of the present wrought with artistry and with sincerity which he



A GROUP OF DERUTA VILLAGE WORKERS

EVERY VILLAGE STREET CORNER IS A POTTER'S STUDIO
IN DERUTA

could discover. When I say filled his storehouses, I assume he had such; we never knew. But we did know he bought right and left, and always the *right* things. "What a museum I am leaving to tomorrow!" he would sometimes declare, to which Fra Benozzo (whose very lovely and remarkable etchings were eagerly acquired by the Medici, at dealers' prices, plate by plate, as they appeared!) would reply "Go on!"

Now it happened that on one of the days of our sojourn in Perugia, the Medici rushed into the *albergo* where we were modestly domiciled and breathlessly announced his latest acquisition, a lovely *bacile* of maiolica ware, "made yesterday, men, in Deruta, and it is as fine as anything!" It was very beautiful—St. Francis' Sermon to the Birds the subject of its decoration. "Do you realize," said Medici, "what this plate indicates?" We did! And we were right! It indicated hunting up Deruta, and that meant making sure Cerrio would be on hand at seven in the morning with his astonishing *carrozza* and the equally astonishing horse that raced us all down Perugia's steep hill-street, on into the plain below and along the road which threaded tiny hamlets, till at last this



A HAPPY FAMILY IN DERUTA VILLAGE

jade flew up an ancient overbuilt hill with us, not pausing until the gate of the town was reached. This Emillina was the most extraordinary horse I ever knew. She would discredit any theory of gravitation science has devised. But whatever perils we had escaped,—she took high leaps over pigs, chickens and children completely,—how thrilled we may have been with Cerrio's superb and endless flow of invective speed encouragement, all these things were forgotten in feeling that we were on the threshold of discovery, the finding of a place which systematic old Herr Baedeker had not considered worth his while; a town which produced some of the most beautiful maiolica ware in the world, maiolica which may have been the first from native Italian craftsmen.

Just outside the entrance to the town we alighted, preferring to make our entrance less like that of the occupants of a circus chariot on the home stretch. The Medici had not gone ten paces before he stopped us, crying "Look! see that old sibyl there!" Michael-anglesque in design, an old woman sat on the pavement in front of an ancient building. To the right of her and to the left of her stretched a sea of plates, while



DRYING COURT OF AN ANCIENT MAIOLICA MANUFACTORY IN DERUTA



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

PORTRAIT PLATE, BACILE AMATORIO AND SAINT FRANCIS PLATE. EARLY DERUTA (1520-1535)

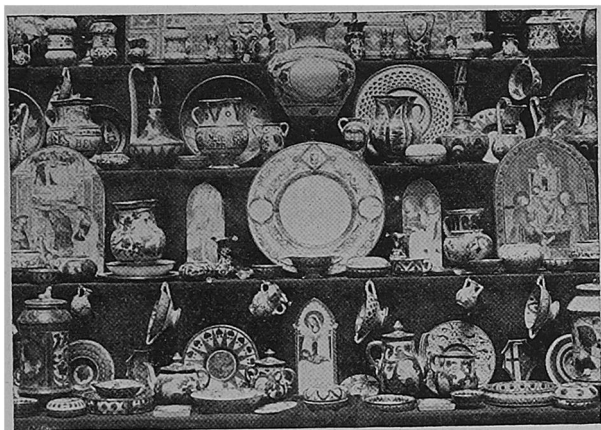
in front of her were great basins full of potter's clay. In her hands she held a basin-like plate, or *bacile*, which she was giving final receiving surfaces to in primitive way. "Behold," said the Medici, "the queen-mother of maiolica!"

Noting our interest in her occupation, the aged signora smiled hospitably and came forward to answer our enquiries. Certainly she knew the maiolica ware of Deruta was very ancient! Was there not, for instance, an old dish in the Signor Sindaco's house which had been made for the wife of Julius Caesar? Had there not been an old apothecary's pot of Deruta ware rescued from Messer Noah's ark? If we would but care to follow her she would take us to the Director of the maiolica industry, and in his office we would see with our very own eyes the actual Deruta ware bowl in which Messer Virgilio mixed enchantment brews! "This is not a sibyl, Medici," I whispered,

"Just plain Signora Ananias!" The Medici turned pitying eyes on me and said with finality, "You have no imagination!"

The Director laughed when we related the scraps of information the sibyl had imparted to us on our way through the mediæval street that led to his mediæval office. "But do you wonder?" said he. "The beginnings of the making of our faïence is wrapped in mystery. Connoisseurs quarrel about it, and collectors can but content themselves with knowing of its later period. The mother-of-pearl lustre, which is so remarkable in the early pieces, and which, to some extent, our modern pieces have succeeded in imitating, has been claimed for Deruta by some, and for Pesaro by others." We found the Medici encyclopaedic on the subject, much to the delight of the Director, and between them both we came to learn much of the history of the ware, although unenlightened as to its origin.

The mother-of-pearl lustre, *madreperla*, was derived from a golden pigment of peculiarly pearly effect in certain lights and as fragments of just such ware have been found in the centuries-old debris heaps near the old-time potteries of Deruta, it seems likely that Deruta was the cradle of the Italian *madreperla* ware. Did old Moorish potters come thither from Spain to teach the early Italian craftsmen of this little town? One can only guess that they did. Com-



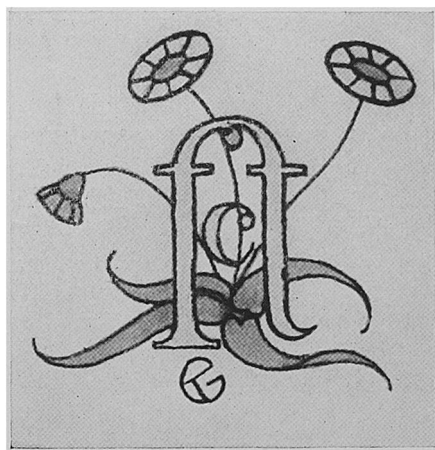
A DISPLAY OF MODERN DERUTA MAIOLICA

pared to the maiolica of Gubbio, the old faïence of Deruta seems to have the distinguishing characteristics of being coarser in grounding, design outlines more loosely drawn and of a somewhat colder blue, the golden *reflet* more brassy in character. Then the deep blues in the old unlustred Deruta maiolica appear not so brilliant as those of the Caffaggiolo ware. I do not doubt but that Deruta communicated her

faïence secrets to Gubbio (a day's journey distant) at an early period.

The earliest dated piece of Deruta maiolica is a votive plaque in the Castellani collection. The date it bears is 1505 and it is inscribed AVENDO. IO. LOBE. DOL. AMALATE. IN. CHASA. MERECOMMANDAE. AQUISTA. GLORIOSA. VER. MARIA. EF. SAO. The Salting collection contains a Deruta plate dated 1525, certain pieces dated between 1541 and 1545 bear the inscription of EL FRATE; but who this *frate* was we have yet to know. In the Sacristy of the Church of S. Pietro at Perugia we later saw a pavement of Deruta tiles which was dated 1563.

However, the maiolica industry existed in Deruta a couple of centuries before the Sixteenth. Documentary evidence shows that as early as the eighth decade of the Fourteenth century—1387 to be exact—potteries for making maiolica were established in Deruta. Another early



A MODERN MONOGRAM TILE MADE AT DERUTA BY AN AMERICAN STUDENT OF THE HISTORY OF EARLY ITALIAN MAIOLICA WARE

document shows that the use of tin in the fabrication of the faïence dates back to 1475.

I do not think these things would ever have dimmed the sibyl's faith in the stories *she* told! Later, when we stopped to talk to her again after inspecting the interesting old buildings where the very beautiful and fully worth collecting modern ware was being produced (in the same manner, with the same sort of clay

glazes, decoration pigments, molds, etc., that had been in use for centuries), our sibyl had more stories to tell us, stories the like of which completely welded together ancient and modern history, stories which wedded the legends of antiquity to the happenings of but yesterday, and how glibly she did it! Had we ever heard of the Baglioni of Perugia? We certainly had! Well he once built a whole house of Deruta maiolica tiles and invited the poet Dante and the composer Verdi to visit him there! "Upon my word!" exclaimed the Medici, "but you have an imagination, Signora!" To which she replied ingeniously, "What is an imagination Signor?" With a pleasant nudge at the Medici, I ventured "An imagination, signora, is a valuable adjunct much sought by collectors to enhance the charm of their acquisitions." The sibyl only shook her head, but the Medici understood



PLATTERS OF POTTER'S CLAY IN THE FOREGROUND, BACK OF WHICH AN OLD ITALIAN WOMAN IS SEEN AT HER TASK OF PREPARING THE MOLDED PLATES FOR THE FIRST STAGE OF DECORATION